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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 000485

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE
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E.O.12958: N/A
TAGS: PGOV KDEM AM
SUBJECT: AMID ELECTORAL IMPROVEMENTS, VIOLENCE PUNCTUATES SCENE

REFERENCE: YEREVAN 00443

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¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Campaign events around Armenia this week have been largely uneventful; several parties - including opposition -- successfully staged rallies without government interference, garnering modest attendance despite poor weather. The Police announced significant progress in their work to update the voter registry. The calm was punctuated, however, by gunfire in Yerevan April 20, which is the third instance of violence in recent weeks. This sudden rash of violent incidents is an unusual and most unwelcome side-effect of an otherwise encouraging campaign season.
END SUMMARY

POLICE ANNOUNCE VOTER LIST PROGRESS

¶2. (SBU) Local media widely covered a press conference with Alvina Zakarian, chief of the passport and visa department of the Armenian Police, who said that the initial voters lists have been purged of the names of ineligible and deceased voters and that inaccuracies brought to the attention of the department are being addressed. Zakarian said the total number of eligible voters now stands at 2,318,493, after removing 10,254 people, which included 1,720 names of the deceased, 3,283 people presently performing mandatory military service, and 290 people who have sold their apartments. She reported that in the past 10 days, over 300 citizens have exchanged their Soviet passports for new ones and 3,550 have updated their residence's address on the lists. The department has also initiated a hotline for the public to report inaccuracies in the lists, noting it has received 77 calls since its inception on 9 April.

RALLIES PROCEEDING FREELY

¶3. (SBU) This week's rallies appeared to proceed without government interference, and opposition parties did not report any difficulties informing authorities of their plans. Prime Minister Sargsyan visited the Kanaker-Zeytun community of Yerevan, where he highlighted progress made in the last seven years under the Republican Party, specifying increases in pensions and teacher salaries. The Armenian Revolutionary Federation-Dashnaksutyun (ARF) held a town hall-style meeting where attendees raised concerns over the lack of progress made by the party in the outgoing government; ARF representatives at the meeting asked for more support on 12 May as they can only do so much with the 11 seats it currently holds.

¶4. (SBU) Several opposition parties held rallies both in Yerevan and in the southern regions, pulling modest attendance despite

inclement weather. Both the Orinats Yerkir and Republic parties attracted approximately 100 attendees each in Yerevan on Thursday, and press reporting did not indicate a noticeable police presence at either location. Artashes Geghamian's National Unity Party campaigned in rural Lori region, speaking to a mostly elderly crowd whom he urged not to take bribes in exchange for their votes. Local television showed Geghamian was greeted with long applause and chanting of "Geghamian". The Heritage Party of Raffi Hovannissian completed a two-day regional campaign tour of the Vayots Dzor and Syunik regions south of Yerevan without interference, although Hovannissian commented the small crowd appeared intimidated, without specifying further details.

ANOTHER VIOLENT INCIDENT MARS CAMPAIGN

15. (SBU) In the face of a calm week of energetic campaigning, another outbreak of violence occurred Thursday in broad daylight on the heels of last week's Prosperous Armenia office bombing (Ref A). Press reported a gun fight broke out in Yerevan's Erebuni district when unknown assailants fired on businessman Aram Vartanian, better known as Vstrechi Aper, the youngish new director of a cement factory in Yerevan. Our police contacts, who are still investigating, told us that there had also been a bomb explosion at the scene. Apparently no one was wounded in the incident. The event has received surprisingly little media attention so far, and details remain sketchy.

COMMENT

16. (SBU) These recurrent outbreaks of violence are a disturbing anomaly. We suspect that the government is working to tamp down

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these eruptions, and that probably is why news coverage has been so slight. Given that these kinds of incidents are so unusual, we have to presume they are election related, probably arising from bare-knuckled back-room jostling between rival political circles, most likely the Republicans and Prosperous Armenia.